> the socialists of the oppressed nation must, in particular, defend and implement the full and unconditional unity, including organizational unity, of the workers of the oppressed nation and those of the oppressor nation. Without this it is impossible to defend the independent policy of the proletariat and their class solidarity with the proletariat of other countries.[20]

Through the period of the Popular Front (its name for the strategy Lenin describes), the CP maintained its popularity among African Americans and many of the oppressed. But over time, the constantly shifting, contradictory positions of the CP and Soviet Union, which were now led by the increasingly tyrannical Josef Stalin, led to a mass exodus from the party after the war. In the United States during the war, the CP had embraced the Democratic Party and called for unity against Hitler at all costs. Their conclusion that this meant American Blacks should therefore downplay the continuing fight against racial inequality would eventually erode the ranks of the CP's Black membership. But the foibles of the CP should not be conflated with the validity of anticapitalism and socialism as political theories that inform and guide the struggle for Black liberation. C.L.R. James, a Black revolutionary from the Caribbean and a collaborator of Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky, continued to develop Marxist theory and its relationship to the Black struggle when he wrote in 1948—years before the emergence of the civil rights movement—about the dynamics of the Black movement and its impact on the class struggle in general:

> We say, number one, that the Negro struggle, the independent Negro struggle, has a vitality and a validity of its own; that it has deep historic roots in the past of America and in present struggles; it has an organic political perspective, along which it is traveling, to one degree or another, and everything shows that at the present time it is traveling with great speed and vigor. We say, number two, that this independent Negro movement is able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights and is not led necessarily either by the organized labor movement or the Marxist party. We say, number three, and this is the most important, that it is able to exercise a powerful influence upon the revolutionary proletariat, that it has got a great contribution to make to the development of the proletariat in the United States, and that it is in itself

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> a constituent part of the struggle for socialism. In this way we challenge directly any attempt to subordinate or to push to the rear the social and political significance of the independent Negro struggle for democratic rights.[21]

James's observations still resonate, especially in the context of today's movement. The Black movement is an independent force that has its own timing, logic, and perspective based on the history of racism and oppression in this country.

It is also the case that when the Black movement goes into motion, it destabilizes all political life in the United States. King argued that the Black movement "forc[es] America to face all its interrelated flaws—racism, poverty, militarism, and materialism. It . . . expos[es] the evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws."[22] The oppression of Black workers exposes the foundational lie of the United States as a free and democratic society more than that of any other group, with the exception of the Indigenous population. The political activism and rebellion of Black people bring that lie to the surface for all to see, throwing into question the actual nature of US society. White workers have always followed the lead of Black workers, and it is for this reason that, far from being marginal to the struggles of Black people, socialists have *always* been at the center of those movements. Socialists and communists were so identified with the antiracist movement that at the height of McCarthyism, antiracist organizing was automatically assumed to be the work of communists.

The Political Economy of Racism

Capitalism is an economic system based on the exploitation of the many by the few. Because of the gross inequality it produces, capitalism requires various political, social, and ideological tools to divide the majority—racism is one among many oppressions intended to serve this purpose. Oppression is used to justify, "explain," and make sense of rampant inequality. For example, racism developed under the regime of slavery to explain and justify the enslavement of Africans at a time when the world was celebrating the notion of human rights, liberty, freedom, and self-determination. The dehumanization and

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subjected status of Black skin had to be rationalized in this moment of new political possibilities.

It is widely accepted that the racial oppression of slaves was rooted in the exploitation of the slave economy, but fewer recognize that under capitalism, *wage slavery* is the pivot around which all other inequalities and oppressions turn. Capitalism used racism to justify plunder, conquest, and slavery, but as Karl Marx pointed out, it would also come to use racism to divide and rule—to pit one section of the working class against another and, in doing so, blunt the class consciousness of all. To claim, then, as Marxists do, that racism is a product of capitalism is not to deny or diminish its centrality to or impact on American society. It is simply to explain its origins and persistence. Nor is this reducing racism to just a function of capitalism; it is locating the dynamic relationship between class exploitation and racial oppression in the functioning of American capitalism.

Karl Marx has been criticized for ignoring the issues of race in his own day, but there is evidence that Marx was well aware of the centrality of race under capitalism. He did not write extensively on slavery and its racial impact, but he did write about how European capitalism's emergence was rooted in the pilfering, rape, and destruction of natives, colonial subjects, and Black slaves. He famously wrote that "the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of Black skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production."[23] Marx also recognized the degree to which slavery was central to the world economy:

> Direct slavery is just as much the pivot of bourgeois industry as machinery, credits, etc. Without slavery you have no cotton; without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that has given the colonies their value; it is the colonies that have created world trade, and it is world trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry. Thus slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance. Without slavery North America, the most progressive of countries, would be transformed into a patriarchal country. Wipe out North America from the map of the world, and you will have anarchy—the complete decay of modern commerce and civilization. Cause slavery to disappear and you will have wiped America off the map of nations.

> Thus slavery, because it is an economic category, has always existed among the institutions of the peoples. Modern nations have been able only to disguise slavery in their own countries, but they have imposed it without disguise upon the New World.[24]

Thus within Marxism there is a fundamental understanding of the centrality of slave labor to national and international economies.

But what about race? Marx did not write prolifically on race, but one can look to his correspondence and deliberations on the American Civil War to get some idea about his views of racial oppression and how it operated within capitalism and his opposition to it. For example, in *Black Reconstruction*, W.E.B. Du Bois quotes at length a letter Marx penned, as head of the International Workingmen's Association, to Abraham Lincoln in 1864, in the midst of the Civil War:

> The contest for the territories which opened the epoch, was it not to decide whether the virgin soil of immense tracts should be wedded to the labor of the immigrant or be prostituted by the tramp of the slaver driver? When an oligarchy of 300,000 slave holders dared to inscribe for the first time in the annals of the world "Slavery" on the banner of armed revolt, when on the very spots where hardly a century ago the idea of one great Democratic Republic had first sprung up, whence the first declaration of the rights of man was issued . . . when on the very spots counter-revolution . . . maintained "slavery to be a beneficial institution". . . and cynically proclaimed property in man "the cornerstone of the new edifice" . . . then the working classes of Europe understood at once . . . that the slaveholders' rebellion was to sound the tocsin for a general holy war of property against labor. . . . They consider it an earnest sign of the epoch to come that it fell to the lot of Abraham Lincoln, the single-minded son of the working class, to lead his country through the matchless struggles for the rescue of the enchained race and the Reconstruction of a social order.

Not only was Marx personally opposed to slavery and actively organizing against it, but he theorized that slavery and the intense race prejudice that flowed from it were problems not just for the slaves themselves, but for white workers who were constantly under the threat of losing work to slave labor.

This did not mean white workers were sympathetic to the cause of the slaves—with a few notable exceptions, they were not. Marx was

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not, however, addressing the issue of consciousness; he was describing the objective factors that created the *potential* for solidarity. He wrote in *Capital*, "In the United States of America, every independent movement of the workers was paralyzed as long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the Black it is branded." Marx grasped the modern dynamics of racism, as the means by which workers who had common objective interests could also become mortal enemies because of subjective, but nevertheless real, racist and nationalist ideas. Looking at the tensions between Irish and English workers, with a nod toward the American situation, Marx wrote:

> Every industrial and commercial center in England possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude is much the same as that of the "poor whites" to the "niggers" in the former slave states of the USA. The Irishman pays him back with interest in his own money. He sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and stupid tool of the English rule in Ireland. This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organization. It is the secret by which the capitalist maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.[25]

From this we can see a Marxist theory of how racism operated after slavery was ended. Marx was highlighting three things: first, that capitalism promotes economic competition between workers; second, that the ruling class uses racist ideology to divide workers against each other; and, finally, that when one group of workers suffer oppression, it negatively affects all workers and the class as a whole.

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White Supremacy for Some, Not Others

If white working-class people do not benefit from capitalist exploitation, then why do they allow racism to cloud their ability to unite with nonwhite workers for the greater good of all working people? The answer requires understanding how a white identity was created as a corollary to the racism directed at African Americans.

One benefit of the North American form of racial slavery to enslavers and the ruling class generally was that it deflected potential class tensions among white men. American freedom for whites was contingent on American slavery for Blacks. Historian Edmund Morgan explains that slavery was

> the primary evil that men sought to avoid for society as a whole by curbing monarchs and establishing republics. But it was also the solution to one of society's most serious problems, the problem of the poor. Virginians could outdo English republicans as well as New England ones, partly because they had solved the problem: they had achieved a society in which most of the poor were enslaved.[26]

The enslaved could not easily rise up; if and when they did, all white men could unite to subjugate them. Small white farmers and big white planters had nothing in common except that they were not slaves, and that eased the potential tensions between them.

When slavery ended, an evolving strategy of "white supremacy" functioned in a similar way to blunt the political and economic tensions that existed between white men in the South, as chapter 4 describes. Broadly, "white supremacy" was the response to the supposed threat of "Negro domination"—the idea that the end of slavery and the reforms of Reconstruction would reverse the roles of Blacks and whites. Poor whites were recruited to the "lost cause" of white supremacy in order to preserve their own privileged spot in the hierarchy or risk their own demise with the ever-present threat of "negro domination." But the rallying cry of "white supremacy" was intended to obscure, not elucidate. "White supremacy" was not a coherent strategy "but involved ad hoc responses to chaotic circumstances."[27] In its original iteration it was intended to remove Blacks from political power, without which they would be more vulnerable to economic coercion. Above all, "white supremacy did not mean that whites were to be supreme." Instead, it

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